

## Mrs Webster's religion: conspiracist extremism on the Christian far right

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**ABSTRACT** Ruotsila examines the interpenetration of premillennialist Christian fundamentalism and secular conspiracy theory through a case study of Nesta Webster, the pioneer of modern Illuminati theory. He offers an alternative to the usual interpretation of Webster as an example of delusional fascist psychopathology, and roots her thinking instead in a secularized rendering of premillennialist Christian eschatological thought. The article shows how Webster grew up as a Plymouth Brethren premillennialist and how, in the 1910s and 1920s, she reconfigured this premillennialism into the Illuminati theory, renaming some of the key theological concepts and instituting in their place her own cast of Jewish, Communist and apostate Christian conspirators, yet retaining the sequencing, the teleology and the general terminology of premillennialism. In such conservative propaganda and educational organizations as the Anti-Socialist Union, the Internationale contre le Mal International, the British Fascisti and the Patriots' Inquiry Centre of the so-called Die-hard movement, Webster then tried to devise strategies for combatting the influence of the Illuminati, and in so doing she always emphasized the Christian themes with which she and many of these organizations' other activists were familiar. Ruotsila shows that Webster's kind of conspiracism proved appealing, especially in those circles in which the categories of premillennialist eschatology survived after the original theological content had been drained from its forms. Therefore, Webster's theories came increasingly to be appropriated not just by fascist and proto-fascist groups but, from the 1930s onwards, also by a range of respectable premillennialist clergy. Especially in the United States, where eschatological thought has remained a major force in popular consciousness into the twenty-first century, while losing much of its original doctrinal coherence, Webster's theories were co-opted and blended with the original meanings of premillennialism.

**KEYWORDS** anti-Communism, antisemitism, Christian far right, conspiracy, eschatology, fascism, fundamentalism, Illuminati, premillennialism

Posterity has named Nesta H. Webster (1876–1960) the *grande dame* of modern conspiracy theory. Her influence on antisemitic far right organizations and ideologies has been profound and geographically wide-ranging ever since the publication of her earliest works, *The French Revolution* (1919) and *World Revolution* (1921), the books that restored the Illuminati theory to popular parlance. Her major works remain in print, some of them in their seventh or eighth, revised, editions, and her name and memory continue to evoke admiration among extremists of varying descriptions across the world.

Historians usually tell her story as that of an emotionally unstable, middle-class woman drawn to various personal and group fantasies of an occult nature. Shaken by the unrest attending the First World War and by her own nervous breakdown, she is said to have constructed an imaginative world conspiracy theory with which she tried to explain the paradigmatic, personal and actual chaos around and inside of her. By the mid-1920s the logic of that conspiracy theory led her to the antisemitic politics of the British fascists, and to ever more paranoid delusions about mass hypnotism, telepathy and black magic as major world powers. For most historians, her delusions establish Webster as a glaring case of fascist psychopathology.<sup>1</sup> Gendered and psychological assumptions proliferate in this appraisal, as do assumptions about the class and status anxieties of the alleged 'lunatic fringe' of the radical right. Seen in this way, it is all too easy to marginalize Webster's message and importance, and to pretend that her abiding appeal is relevant only for the practitioners of mental health care.

Yet there is another, much simpler way of seeing Nesta Webster. She can be seen as an exemplar of the Christian far right, as someone who grew up bounded by a certain set of unquestioned religio-political presuppositions and who later proved astute in appropriating and reconfiguring ancient archetypal constructs for modern uses, as a transitional figure in the progression from premillennialist Christian apocalypticism to secular antisemitic conspiracism that took place in the post-Christian twentieth century. If Webster is placed in this context, her autobiography, doctrine and appeal demonstrate not just a psychological archetype but rather the susceptibilities of a certain kind of religious sensibility, and the potentialities inherent in a range of dualistic Judaeo-Christian epistemologies.

### Premillennialist contexts and presuppositions

Nesta Webster's thinking was grounded in a highly prescriptive and detailed premillennialist Christian doctrine. The model allowed those within its paradigmatic fold a sense of certainty, and, in a general, amorphous way, was much more widely influential than commonly realized. Webster's own interpretations found a broadly receptive audience among great numbers of her contemporaries who in various ways were influenced by the key tenets of premillennialism.

Webster was born a granddaughter of Bishop Shuttleworth of the Church of England diocese of Chichester and a daughter of deeply religious parents who were steeped in the existential gloominess of the Plymouth Brethren, the

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Lineham, *British Fascism, 1918-39: Parties, Ideology and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2000), 178; Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: A History, 1918-1935* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1967), 57-61. It is Thurlow who first described Webster as 'the grand dame of British conspiracy theory' (8).

single most important premillennialist sect in late Victorian Protestantism. She was reared in a highly restrictive moral environment in which all amusements, even the reading of novels and the eating of sweets, were strictly forbidden, and she had no real contact with the secular world until she was an undergraduate at Westfield College in Hampstead. While her faith was further strengthened at that college, Webster's already well-entrenched world-view was confirmed even more by her participation in Quaker meetings and by her revulsion at Hindu religious practices encountered while she lived in India. Somewhat contradictorily, in her private spiritual life she evolved into a confirmed mystic who drank deeply at the well of modern spiritualism and occultism, until in 1910 Webster became convinced that she was the reincarnated daughter of aristocratic French parents who had been persecuted during the French Revolution. From then on, she thought that the experiences of her earlier life had made her privy to unique first-hand insights into anti-Christian forces.<sup>2</sup>

The occult experiences of Webster's mature years were not instrumental, however, in constructing her world-view. Had they been, a case could be made for her psychopathology being the most important source of her thinking. But the original grounds of her spirituality and world-view lay, in fact, in the premillennialist eschatology of the Plymouth Brethren, in whose fold she grew up. These Brethren were English and Irish evangelicals who had left the established churches in an early nineteenth-century protest against formalism and ecclesiasticism, and, forever after, they had yearned for a return to a simple communitarian and bibliocentric faith.<sup>3</sup> Taking *sola scriptura* most literally, they devised convoluted theological systems of thought on the basis of a literal biblical interpretation that dispensed with all the insights of modern biblical criticism. The Brethren's historical consciousness, in particular, was a result of their biblical literalism, based on a few crucial and controversial passages in the apocalyptic books of the Christian Bible. More than anything else, it was this dispensational premillennialist consciousness of time, into which Nesta Webster was indoctrinated as a child, that shaped her world-view and politics.

As enunciated by their premier theologian, John Nelson Darby, the Brethren's view of history centred on the expectation of a cataclysmic end of the world that was to be ushered in by human rebellion against the known will of God. This literal Armageddon, long in coming but eventually culminating in a single world war, would be followed by the Second Coming of Christ and preceded by the separation of the rebellious from the remnant of true Christians, with the latter sharing in the millennial rule of

2 Nesta Webster, *Spacious Days* (London: Heinemann 1949), 37–83, 88–9, 171–5; Richard M. Gilman, *Behind World Revolution: The Strange Career of Nesta H. Webster* (Ann Arbor, MI: Insight Books 1982), 13, 15–22.

3 D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge 1989), 157–9.

Christ over a perfected earth. Chronologically, Darby taught that the French Revolution had marked the beginning of the last period in premillennial history and that this period was to be marked by increasing apostasy in church and state, and by constant degeneration in personal morals. Furthermore, this period would witness the return of (unbelieving) Jews to their Promised Land and their increasing persecution, and it would, eventually, usher in a final world-empire ruled by the Antichrist who would regulate all human activities with the assistance of apostate Christians and secular Jews. Earlier, so-called historicist premillennialists had taught that the Antichrist already existed (most likely in the Papacy), but Darby's rendition placed his coming in the future. This made Darbyite premillennialism both more interested in interpreting current events and more open to new and imaginative discoveries.<sup>4</sup>

Translated in terms of current events, Darby's scheme meant that in Nesta Webster's lifetime the churches were already in a state of increasing apostasy, every temporal institution was predominantly evil and corrupt, and the bulk of humanity so spiritually degenerate that all reform was futile. The most that faithful Christians could do, according to Darby, was to separate themselves from the surrounding corruption and to 'strengthen the things that remaineth' of older Christian structures of thought, habituation and organization. They could do this limited work in the full assurance of their own salvation and certain that the socio-economic and political incidents that they would have to encounter in their remaining time on earth would conform to the interpretations given to them in the premillennialist doctrine of the end-times.

By Webster's time, Darbyite premillennialism was no longer the doctrine of a small, frowned-upon fringe that it had originally been. Rather, by the early twentieth century, there were to be found at the very forefront of the premillennialist movement such eminently respectable Anglican and Nonconformist groups as the Advent Testimony Movement, the Prophecy Investigation Society and the Anglican Guild of Prayer for the Return of the Lord, as well as the Mildmay and Keswick conferences: all mainstream, influential and respectable groups that counted major clerical and lay leaders among their activists. In fact, so successfully did these bodies popularize premillennial interpretations of current events that it has been estimated that, by the time that Webster began her public polemic in the early twentieth century, premillennialism had come to dominate the eschatologies even of the clergy of the Church of England.<sup>5</sup>

Countless *fin-de-siècle* Christian conservatives imbibed the basic premillennialist worldview, whether they chose to subscribe to the Plymouth

4 Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1970), 29-60.

5 Bebbington, 157-9, 187-93, 223-4; Columba Graham Flegg, 'Gathered under Apostles': *A Study of the Catholic Apostolic Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1992), 95, 434-51.



Brethren's specific teachings or not. These included such lay Christian activists of otherwise widely different doctrinal persuasions as the second Viscount Halifax, the long-time leader of Anglo-Catholic laity, and the Eighth Duke of Northumberland, a devotee of the Irvingite sect who was seen as an extreme Protestant. Both men were leading and eminently respectable conservative politicians in Webster's lifetime, and the politics of both were driven by the conviction that the world was degenerating and the Church was its only hope, that most of the problems of the age were ultimately rooted in a decay of religion and that social reform by mere humans was futile since the returning Christ alone could renovate the world.<sup>6</sup>

Even if most other Edwardian and inter-war conservatives were not as firmly grounded in a personal affirmation of premillennialist eschatology as Halifax and Northumberland, a sizeable number was rooted, at least, in the Manichaean juxtaposition of good and evil that was at the core of premillennialism, a juxtaposition that was seen not just in transcendental but corporate terms and projected on to current events and actual political protagonists in contemporary controversies. Apostasy in the church, democracy and materialism as signs of the lessening of a Godward orientation, socialism in politics and centralization in the economy as prefigurations of the Antichrist's world-empire, and Zionism as a portent of the end-times: all of these were originally premillennialist propositions that resonated with congenitally pessimistic conservatives as they took stock of their dwindling powers in the Edwardian and inter-war years.

The mature Nesta Webster was herself no more in the premillennialist mainstream than most of those other conservatives who borrowed from or were otherwise influenced by premillennialist doctrine. Her spiritualist and occult experiments were highly suspect to most mainstream Christians, and they did to some degree modify that underlying doctrine, although they did not destabilize its key elements. Webster drew on both sets of influences when—together with a significant number of highly respectable, aristocratic and upper-middle-class advocates of conservative causes—she came to respond to the trembling of her remembered world that was ushered in by the late nineteenth-century rise of popular democracy, socialist agitation and pluralist value-systems. In her case, the French Revolution stood out as the beginning of the end, and all subsequent history as confirmations thereof, the periodization suggested not just by the illumination provided by her earlier incarnation but equally by the established dispensationalist matrix of current events. Neither theologian nor ecclesiastical activist, and in some ways a stranger to the original meanings of premillennialism, Webster's religious promptings were nevertheless as pronounced as the appeal of her message would be to those more traditionally premillennial.

6 J. G. Lockhart, *Charles Lindley, Viscount Halifax, Volume Two, 1885-1934* (London: Geoffrey Bles 1930), 36-7, 244-5; Markku Ruotsila, 'The Catholic apostolic church in British politics', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (forthcoming January 2005).

### Premillennialism and modern conspiracy theory

Whether out of emotional instability, opportunism or genuine spiritual conviction, Webster came to depict world events as manifestations of a basic transcendental struggle between Christ and Satan. She forged out of the archetypal materials of her Christian heritage a highly appealing, prescriptive matrix of interpretations that placed contemporary radical movements in the context of premillennialist eschatology, dispensed with the original meanings of that eschatology, and put in their place her own version of the Satanic cast of the end-times. Doctrinally, the Illuminati theory that she constructed and successfully disseminated was in many ways a perversion of premillennialist Christian eschatology. Yet, on another level, it was deeply indebted both to the latter's categories and to its historical sequencing.

Basically, Webster's Illuminati were the premillennialists' Antichrist rendered in secular and corporate terms. She claimed that late eighteenth-century French and German revolutionists and Enlightenment philosophers had created the Illuminati, a secret society later taken over by Freemasons and secular Jews that was 'allied with Satan' and dedicated to the overthrow of all existing state and church authorities and all generally accepted moral constructs and norms. Webster held that the Illuminati possessed a detailed and deliberate plan of subversion that it had been implementing since its foundation; accordingly, it aspired to world dominance, to a single centralized world-state ruled by a core cabal of its own conspirators. Webster went on, more emphatically than the original, eighteenth-century supporters of the theory, to link modern socialist and communist movements to the Illuminati, and she supposed that clerical reformers and modernist theologians, often unwittingly, were also being used as the Illuminati's tools. According to Webster, the German imperial government was also being used by the Illuminati, its imperialist designs nicely dovetailing with the Illuminati's plans for world conquest, and its readiness to employ socialist subversives to weaken its rivals a source of important, if unintended, encouragement to this key Illuminati proxy. A further element of the Illuminati's alleged campaign related to the corruption of public morals, to the undermining of traditional family and marriage relationships and sexual practices, and to the destruction of those national and imperial allegiances that stood in the way of popular acceptance of the Illuminati's universalist claims.<sup>7</sup>

By and by, stressed Webster, the multiple forms of the Illuminati's attack would destroy the essential bulwarks of Christian civilization and usher in the 'vast kingdom of the anti-Christ'.<sup>8</sup> Throughout her theory, the framework, chronology and teleology were each patently premillennialist, recast and

7 For the two most comprehensive expositions of this thesis, see Nesta Webster, *The French Revolution: A Study in Democracy* (London: Constable 1919), and Nesta Webster, *World Revolution: The Plot against Civilisation* (London: Constable 1921).

8 Webster, *World Revolution*, 325.

partly renamed but by no means superseded. They differed from traditional premillennialism in their lack of emphasis on the soteriological and eschatological, yet they paid continued obeisance to premillennialist terminology in that they were structured around the concept of an Antichrist that was undefined and thrown in as a generic referent, and readily understandable to all who had been schooled in premillennialist categories of thought.

There were late eighteenth-century antecedents for all of this in the writings of the French Jesuit Abbé Baruel, the Scottish scientist John Robison, the American cleric Jedidiah Morse and other critics of the French Revolution. These early theories were identical with Webster's in that they did not see the Pope as the Antichrist, and in that regard diverged from traditional Protestant eschatological thinking. They enjoyed a brief popularity in the 1780s and 1790s, but were largely forgotten thereafter except among marginal, esoteric groups.<sup>9</sup> When premillennialism did emerge soon afterwards, its early advocates—many of whom were Jesuits like the Abbé Baruel—also denied that the Pope was the Antichrist but suggested that only the future would uncover the actual identity of the Antichrist. It was not a great leap for those influenced by premillennialism to put the Illuminati in the Antichrist's vacant place. But it was not before the upheavals of the First World War that the conditions existed for individuals like Webster, schooled in premillennialism in their childhood, to merge its apocalyptic conspiracism with the similar, more secular themes of Illuminati theory.

The element least changed in Webster's Illuminati theory from its original premillennialist form was the denunciation of most of the organized Christian churches. Throughout her writings there ran a religio-political motif that accused a modernist and liberal clergy of undermining, under the cover of priestly office and Christiansounding rhetoric, the British nation's inculcation in those Christian non-negotiables that, as Darby had taught, alone could offer salvation from the gathering apocalypse. Her special targets were, as she put it, 'the so-called Social Gospellers who enlist the sympathy of the devout by invoking the authority of Christ for their revolutionary schemes, the red clergy of England, ordained to preach the gospel of love, but who disseminate instead the poison of class-hatred'.<sup>10</sup> Just like conservative Christian polemicists of the time, Webster castigated the 'Social Gospellers' as the underminers of family, personal and state morality and of all proper aesthetic standards, and, like the premillennialists, she designated them as the 'false prophets' foreseen in the apocalyptic books of the Christian Bible. Unlike the clergy of the time, however, she also linked them with the Illuminati.<sup>11</sup>

9 Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New York: Harper and Row 1966), 25–40; Sandeen, 39.

10 Nesta Webster, 'The red star', *Patriot*, 4 June 1925, 49–51.

11 Nesta Webster, 'Christianity and socialism', *Patriot*, 13 January 1927, 32–3; Nesta Webster, 'Illuminism and clergy', *Patriot*, 14 April 1927, 345–7; Nesta Webster, *World Revolution: The Plot against Civilization*, ed. Anthony Gittens, 7th edn (Cranbrook, Western Australia: Veritas Publishing Company 1994), 305–8, 354–7.

The ease with which Webster could thus censure even the most moderate forms of liberal Christian social reform was not primarily a sign of a paranoid personality disorder. Rather, it was the result of a dispensational premillennialist frame of mind that was rooted in evangelical separatism, that presupposed that the Church was apostate, and that expected all temporal institutions to continue to degenerate in the long run-up to the Second Coming of Christ. Most fundamentalist Christians of Webster's time made the same charge and based it on the same Darbyite doctrine. That Webster came to discuss this in the context of an Illuminati-centred theory was more a renaming than a destabilizing of genuine premillennialism.

### **The dramatis personae of conspiracy**

Judaism, on the other hand, had to be somewhat perverted if it was to fit into the Illuminati format. Webster had to silence the longstanding and rather profound philosemitism that characterized the premillennialism that she knew. Darbyites shared the general Christian belief that, in the premillennial age, God would continue to punish Jews for their refusal to accept Christ as their Messiah, yet they also emphasized the irrevocability of Jewish chosenness and believed that religiously observant, messianic Jews would be co-workers with God in the final governance of the renovated, millennial world. They tended not to identify Jews with the Antichrist, and they strongly deprecated all persecutions of Jews and combined vigorous proselytization with philosemitic support for Zionism.<sup>12</sup> Webster had to find a way around all of this if she was to fit modern Jewry into the role of the Illuminati's prime conspirators. She found the way by branding the bulk of modern Jewry as secular and apostate, by linking Jewish 'international finance' with Freemasonry, Zionism with Bolshevism, and both of them with Germanic authoritarianism. Thus she could deny any correspondence between modern Jewry and the Darbyite conception of 'real' Jews.

It was to such an image of secular Jewry that Webster referred when she maintained that there had always been 'a Jewish conspiracy running through Freemasonry', so that the apparent leaders of that putative conspiracy—be they communists, German imperialists or liberal clergy, 'waving their anns, declaiming'—were in fact being 'all the while pulled by wires from behind held in the hands of their sinister directors', the Jews.<sup>13</sup> Most often Webster's Jews were irreligious socialists or rapacious capitalists ('money-changers' whom 'Christ drove out with a whip'), although she did sometimes blend biological racism and economic motifs with older religious prejudices, as in her 1938 statement that 'in the *Cabala* the *Coyim* (Gentiles) are denied human

<sup>12</sup> Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press 1992), 87–90, 181–224, 272–5; Sandeen, 60–70.

<sup>13</sup> Nesta Webster, 'Secret societies and world revolution', *Morning Post*, 15 July 1920, 8.



attributes . . . and [the Jews] look forward to the day when they shall rule the whole world and all the other nations shall be wiped out.<sup>14</sup> Modern socialism, Bolshevism and Zionism thus became but the later forms of the cabbalistic presumption to secret, superior knowledge that justified world-domination by Jews. She summed up this charge in *World Revolution* by claiming that the 'conspiracy of the Jewish race . . . began perhaps at Golgotha' and was one

that hid itself behind the ritual of Freemasonry, that provided the driving force behind the successive revolutionary upheavals, that inspired the sombre hatred of Marx, the malignant fury of Trotsky [sic], and all this with the fixed and unalterable purpose of destroying that Christianity which is hateful to it.<sup>15</sup>

Webster qualified this indictment only with the very minor caveats that not all revolutionary movements were made by secular Jews alone and that not all Jews supported such movements.<sup>16</sup> One could have expected from a premillennialist the much clearer qualification, one that fundamentalist clergy usually offered, making it clear that messianic orthodox Jews were excluded from the denunciation. This was not forthcoming in Webster's published writings.

However, more important than even the putative Jewish directors of the Illuminati, as far as Webster was concerned, were the people of 'simple faith and lack of education' whom the conspiracists could make their surrogate disseminators of false doctrines and subversives.<sup>17</sup> The deceived included all those who had not been touched by the 'Christian civilization' of middle-class thrift, self-help and self-abnegation that Webster embraced instinctively despite her separatist, aculturalist background. The unchurched majority of the working class was included, but so also were all those 'internationalists' who dreamed of pacifying and bettering the world through corporate international effort rather than through the individual and national practice of Christian self-help. Consequently, Webster and like-minded conspirators always saw the League of Nations (and later, the United Nations) as the precursor of the analogous world-empires of the Antichrist and of the Illuminati, as the prophesied overweening world government that would try to pacify and reform the whole world by controlling every aspect of life and thought. Its promises, she maintained, could appeal only to those who no

14 Nesta Webster, 'Germany and England, VI.—Hitler and the Jews', *Patriot*, 17 November 1938, 418.

15 Nesta Webster, 'World revolution', *Morning Post*, 18 July 1920, 8; Webster, *World Revolution*, ed. Gittens, 223, 323, 95–8, 161–6, 284–96, 307.

16 Webster, *World Revolution*, 296; Nesta Webster, *Boche and Bolshevik* (New York: Beckwith Company 1923), 42–3; Nesta Webster, *The Surrender of an Empire* (London: Buswell Publishing Company 1933), 363.

17 Nesta Webster, '“Internationale” and commune—secret societies and pan-Germanism', *Morning Post*, 3 August 1920, 6.

longer knew true Christianity and could therefore be tempted by the promises of the Illuminati's false faith of internationalism.<sup>18</sup> But for the term 'Illuminati', this accusation was practically identical with those made by the conservative evangelicals who fought against the ratification of the League of Nations Covenant.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, Webster classed women as a group among the Illuminati's dupes and pawns. Despite her exceptionally empowered position within male-dominated conservative and fascist circles, she fully subscribed to the most gender-biased views imaginable. To her, women were by nature 'artistic and emotional' and, although she recognized that disadvantaged education had prevented most women from developing their full intellectual powers, Webster insisted that motherhood remained their rightful primary occupation. They were unsuited to politics, she believed, nor could she disabuse herself of the conviction that what she called the 'Primitive Woman'—the uneducated majority of women, or those unlike herself—remained utterly incapable of understanding the issues at stake and the forces at work in the premillennial age.<sup>20</sup> Webster, like many a premillennialist cleric and layperson, therefore opposed equal franchise for women. As she put it, equal suffrage would give the vote to the most excitable and untrustworthy section of the population, with the swift and inevitable result that the socialist vote would multiply overnight.<sup>21</sup>

There were two crucial points in all of this. First, the pawns of the conspirators were of weak or no Christian faith. Second, the pawns were used in a deliberate attempt to destroy 'Christian civilization'. Webster claimed that the destruction of Christian civilization was 'the avowed intention' of Russian Bolsheviks and British socialists, the hidden goal of the Zionists, the unintended result of the Social Gospel, and the inevitable outcome of any German conquest of Europe.<sup>22</sup> She renamed the premillennial world empire of the Antichrist as the League of Nations, and referred to the Antichrist himself as the Illuminati, but otherwise the key suppositions of traditional premillennialism survived in her rendition. This was especially so in Webster's sketch of the putative tools of the Illuminati's advance, which to her were the mass of the unbelievers, the nominal but apostate Christians and the secular,

18 Webster, *The Surrender of an Empire*, 35–7, 54–65; Webster, *World Revolution*, ed. Gilleus, 355–6.

19 Markku Ruotsila, 'Conservative American Protestantism in the League of Nations controversy', *Church History*, vol. 72, September 2003, 593–616; *Advent Testimony Addresses* (London: Chas. J. Thynne 1918), 41, 72–3.

20 Nesta Webster, 'Women and civilisation', *Nineteenth Century and After*, vol. 88, November 1920, 741–59.

21 Webster, *The Surrender of an Empire*, 260–4; Nesta Webster, *The Socialist Network* (London 1926), 121–6, 134; Webster, *World Revolution*, 322–3.

22 Nesta Webster, 'Illuminism and the world revolution', *Nineteenth Century and After*, vol. 88, July 1920, 113; Webster, '“Internationale” and commune', 6; Nesta Webster, 'What is socialism', in *A Handbook for Anti-Socialists* (London: Boswell Publishing Company 1924), 14; Webster, 'The red star', 49–51.

Bolshevized Jews. All these groups, as she saw it, had imbibed the several beliefs in human self-sufficiency that underlay the apostasy and degeneration of the premillennial age.

### The premillennialist embrace of conspiracy

There were some among Webster's closest collaborators—the Eighth Duke of Northumberland, for example, an enthusiastic advocate of Webster's writings<sup>23</sup>—who adhered rather more faithfully to the original premillennialist paradigm even as they borrowed some of her secular interpretations. But the number was large, too, of those so alienated from personal Christian faith that they could no longer comprehend the original meanings of Christian apocalypticism. Webster's conspiracy theory would have been particularly appealing to the latter, persons actually removed from the orbit of confessional Christianity but preferring still to converse in its categories.

Especially in the United States, where eschatological speculation played a crucial role in popular thought even after the original content had been drained of its theological form, various versions of a secularized premillennialism established themselves as major forces in the popular imagination. When Webster first enunciated her theories, premillennialists usually ignored their antisemitic aspects; however, from the 1930s onwards, many highly respected premillennialist clergy began to embrace some version of her antisemitism as well.<sup>24</sup> The founder and lifelong leader of the World Christian Fundamentals Association, the Minnesota Baptist leader William B. Riley, frequently claimed in the late 1930s and the 1940s that an Illuminized Judaism was then at the heart of the world's many ills in the run-up to the Second Coming of Christ.<sup>25</sup> A close co-worker of his, the editor of the influential *Scofield Reference Bible*, Arno C. Gaebelein, wrote an entire book in 1933 that was predicated on Webster's theories and duly credited her as the source.<sup>26</sup> And even the late twentieth-century champion of the New Christian Right, the Reverend Pat Robertson—careful always to substitute for Webster's 'Jews' the more neutral designation 'international finance'—in his book *The New World Order* (1991) went on at great length about the Illuminati

23 Letter from the Eighth Duke of Northumberland to John St Loe Strachey, 14 November 1921: House of Lords Record Office, London, John St Loe Strachey Papers, S/11/5/19; Eighth Duke of Northumberland, 'Quem deus vult perdere', *National Review*, vol. 79, May 1922, 362.

24 Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press 1997), 97–105.

25 William Vance Trollinger, *God's Empire: William Bell Riley and Midwestern Fundamentalism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1990), 67–82.

→ 26 Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Conflict of the Ages: The Mystery of Lawlessness, Its Origin, Historic Development and Coming Defeat* (New York: Publication Office Our Hope 1933), esp. 67–88.

as the precursor of the Antichrist's world-empire. He not only cited but endorsed Webster.<sup>27</sup>

All this goes to show how alluring and easy it was for premillennialists to incorporate Webster's message in their theories. Her message sounded just as responsive a chord in those circles where the key presuppositions and thought-categories of premillennialism were still understood but reinterpreted in secular terms. On the whole, this was in the United States where, according to a 1983 Gallup poll, some 62 per cent still affirmed belief in the physical return of Christ. If questioned more closely, most of this impressive number betrayed a rather loose grasp of the doctrinal suppositions traditionally associated with such a belief.<sup>28</sup> They were, in many ways, more in the Webster than in the Darby mould.

### **Premillennialism, conspiracy and social salvation**

Nesta Webster was primarily a critic of society and, as she saw it, an exposé of hidden occult realities. She was not a constructive political activist. But her voluminous writings did contain a wealth of suggestions for radical change, somewhat unusual but not entirely unrepresentative suggestions that highlighted the agency of organized and personal religiosity. Her many contacts with leading and respected conservatives and backbench politicians, and her extensive transatlantic and pan-European connections, afforded opportunities for influencing actual or putative policies that she assiduously seized. In each case, a defence of Christianity as the foundation and prime mover of western society was at the very core of Webster's interventions. Her suggestions for policy were, in other words, intended to counter, restrain and, if possible, reverse the supposed ascendancy of the Illuminati and its anti-Christian ideology and to expand the sway of Christian teachings and forms of organization. In so far as she was a premillennialist, Webster could not maintain that political resistance could defeat the Illuminati—only the return of Christ could do that—but she nevertheless made the attempt and invited others to make it too.

Webster participated in—or at least supported—the Anti-Socialist Union, the National Citizens' Union, the Britons Society, the British Fascists, the Geneva-based Internationale contre le Mal International and the rather more loosely organized Diehard movement within the Conservative Party. Each of these was primarily a propaganda and educational organization, and each retained direct links to respectable, traditional Christianity and saw itself not least as its defender and advocate. Christian apologetics and public doctrine

27 Pat Robertson, *The New World Order* (Dallas: Word Publishing 1991), 71-3, 180-5. Robertson referred to the undated Christian Book Club of America edition of Webster's book *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements* that was originally published in 1924.

28 Boyer, 1-18.



remained central to the discourse and programmes of each even when it, like Webster herself, became separate from some of the original or customarily accepted formulations of Christian thought.

The Internationale contre le III<sup>e</sup> Internationale (ICTI) is the least well known of these organizations but probably the most important of all the far-right groups with which Webster was associated. Since it had affiliates in some twenty-four countries, mostly in Europe, its influence was, in principle, far broader than any of the others. Although apparently not a member, Webster was certainly a sympathizer; this is perfectly understandable since ICTI saw itself as the primary co-ordinator of national anti-communist and business-interest groups in Europe and America, and even in Southern and Northern Africa, Australasia and China. It was intent on reconnecting the peoples of all these regions to traditional concepts of the rule of law, private property and patriotism, and to notions of family, culture and religion derived from the Christian heritage. While it did engage in more prosaic projects, such as the protection of transportation companies against industrial action, the group's primary interest remained always the maintenance and spread of Christian-based ideas.<sup>29</sup>

Webster criticized the ICTI for adopting too centralized a methodology, but she insisted that the general approach of the group was not just laudable but absolutely necessary.<sup>30</sup> The organization was not very important in Britain, however, since its only British affiliate was the Central Council of Economic Leagues, which was led by the eminently moderate Lord Gainford.<sup>31</sup> In the *Diehard* publication, the *Patriot*, and the *Morning Post* she proffered a supposedly perfected version of the ICTI approach, a model for public persuasion and organization that would suppress 'the enemies of Christianity', which democracy had supposedly thrown up, and would empower those who were propelled by 'the Christian principle'. As far as Webster was concerned, the best means to this end would have been the Eighth Duke of Northumberland's *Diehard* model—a most respectable Christian conservative model—and she greatly mourned the untimely passing of the Duke in 1930, since she realized that thereafter her kind of Christian far-right programmes would have to go without a respectable and inspiring head.<sup>32</sup>

As it existed before and just after the so-called *Diehard* revolt of 1922, Northumberland's model was about 'strengthening the things that remaineth', not about wholesale renovation of any sort. Rooted as it was in Northumberland's own premillennialism, it outlined neither a perfect past nor a vision of

29 Letters from J. L. Auber to Aarne Somersalo, 30 September and 14 October 1930, and press releases of the ICTI-affiliated Finnish Defence League (Suomen Suojelusliitto), 23 March 1926, 11 September and 15 October 1927; Finnish National Archives, Helsinki, Suomen Suojelusliitto Collection, folders 6, 7 and 11.

30 Nesta Webster, 'Antirevolutionary organisation—VII', *Patriot*, 11 February 1926, 140–2.

31 Finnish Defence League press release, 23 March 1926; Finnish National Archives, Helsinki, Suomen Suojelusliitto Collection, folder 6.

32 Webster, *The Surrender of an Empire*, 168–73, 267.

a perfect future, but only a series of incremental reforms. The putative reforms of the Diehards appealed to Webster because they were predicated on the assumption that ideas mattered and that Christian ideas were supreme, that British institutions had worked in the past only in so far as they were in touch with Christian systems of belief. Northumberland himself stressed that it was no longer possible to effect a return to a fully national embrace of such systems of belief, but he was determined to restrain the triumphal march of secular notions and socialist groups as much as possible. The instruments proposed included a re-emphasis on Christian education and physical training, non-collectivist and paternal efforts to bridge the chasm between the classes and the forceful suppression of domestic subversion in all its forms, as well as separation from the League of Nations, vigorously imperialist foreign policies and, to keep the allegedly Jewish Bolsheviks out of Britain, restrictive immigration policies. Above all, the Diehards wanted a blunt and unapologetic conversation with the nation on the duties and responsibilities of Christian citizens.<sup>33</sup>

Under the auspices of Northumberland's *Patriot* there was established a short-lived Patriot's Inquiry Centre, which Webster ran, a clearing agency for anti-socialist and antisemitic speakers and pamphleteers that also maintained a library of relevant books and other materials. As a perusal of the *Patriot's* editorial policy shows, Christian defence and propagation was at the very core of that journal's *modus operandi* even as it inveighed against the putative Jewish and Bolshevik world conspiracy that it, too, called by the name of the Illuminati. That designation was borrowed from Webster, who was a frequent contributor to the journal, and it came to suffuse the *Patriot's* general approach to current events. Given the personal premillennialist faith of the journal's proprietor, the Duke of Northumberland, it appears that he came to embrace Illuminist conspiracy theory by much the same process that Webster did. Maybe Webster herself played a role in this.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, both of them saw the *Patriot* and the Diehard movement as means of fighting Bolsheviks and other supposed agents of the Illuminati, as well as a form of Christian defence.

The Britons Society, the National Citizens' Union (NCU) and the Anti-Socialist Union (ASU) served a similar purpose for Webster. All three maintained a prominent witness to Christianity as the *sine qua non* of British society and western civilization. Often (as with the Britons) this witness included fully apocalyptic claims about a present transcendental struggle between Christians and the Jewish and Bolshevik allies of Satan; when more temperate (as with

33 'A Statement of Conservative Principles', n.d. [February 1922]: Bodleian Library, Oxford, H. A. Gwynne Papers, dep. 17; Northumberland's address, 22 June 1927, *Parliamentary Debates, House of Lords*, 5th series, vol. 67 (London: HMSO 1927), 864-74; Webster, *The Surrender of an Empire*, 232-3. See also Gregory D. Phillips, *The Diehards: Aristocratic Society and Politics in Edwardian England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1979), 14-17, 81-3, 125-38, which deals with the early period of the Diehard movement.

34 Markku Rauteila, 'The antisemitism of the Eighth Duke of Northumberland's *The Patriot*, 1922-30', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 39, January 2004, 71-92; Gilman, 46-7.

the ASU), the charges related to the supposedly subversive propaganda of modernist Social Gospellers, Labour party activists and other professed, allegedly apostate Christians.<sup>35</sup> Each of the three groups owed much of their religious message to the proto-fascist Church of England cleric, the Rev. Prebendary A. W. Gough, a collaborator of Webster's whose affiliations ranged across the three group's terrain and made him a major religious figure on the interwar extreme Christian right.<sup>36</sup> When Webster appeared before these organizations—and often she did this together with Gough—she, too, would often stress that the fight must first of all be against religious subversives within the church camp.<sup>37</sup>

The ASU existed long before Webster had enunciated her theories, and it had always fought its campaigns with Christian arguments.<sup>38</sup> Although Webster apparently wrote a speaker's handbook for the group,<sup>39</sup> it never did endorse her broader conspiracy theories and cannot be seen as having been significantly influenced by her. The Britons Society, on the other hand, was created in 1919, that is, just when Webster's theories caught fire in the public imagination, and it stands to reason that its blending of traditional Christian defence with Illuminati conspiracism owed much to her. Its propaganda did go somewhat further in its antisemitism than Webster herself, but there was no mistaking the similarities when the Britons claimed, in 1923 for example, that 'no man can possibly be a Christian and not anti-Judaic, for the Jews constitute the one definitely anti-Christian force in the world'. Moreover, the Britons sometimes joined Webster in claiming quite unequivocally that modern Jewry was allied with the Antichrist and tried to subject the entire world to the Antichrist.<sup>40</sup>

The British Fascisti (BF), which Webster joined in 1924, did not differ much in its purpose. Webster was increasingly associated with its activities once she concluded that the Dichards were unlikely to take over the Conservative Party and, in 1926-7, she served on its Grand Council and wrote some of its official pamphlets.<sup>41</sup> Undoubtedly, Webster chose to affiliate with this particular fascist group, which was one of the more moderate and respectable ones

35 Linehan, 45-6, 50-3; Thurlow, 51-7, 65-70; Gisela Lebaelter, *Political Antisemitism in England, 1918-1939* (New York: Holmes and Meier 1978), 49-67; Kenneth D. Brown, 'The Anti-Socialist Union, 1908-49', in Kenneth D. Brown (ed.), *Essays in Anti-Labour History: Responses to the Rise of Labour in Britain* (London: Macmillan 1974), 234-61.

36 Rev. Prebendary A. W. Gough, *The Fight for Man* (London: Boswell Publishing Company 1924), 9-11, 17-24, 27-8, 67, 76-7.

37 'The N.C.U. meeting at Kensington', *Patriot*, 29 April 1926, 396; 'War on Christianity', *Patriot*, 14 April 1927, 345-7.

38 See Joseph Rickaby, *The Greed of Socialism* (London: ASU 1910); J. E. Preston Muddock, *Socialism Antagonistic to Christianity* (London: ASU 1909); *Christianity and Socialism* (London: ASU n.d.).

39 Linehan, 46.

40 Lebaelter, 58-60.

41 Gilman, 44; Julie V. Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism: Women in Britain's Fascist Movement* (London: I. B. Tauris 2003), 31-3, 346.

available, because it too put its original emphasis on the defence of Christianity against communist and secular Jewish subversion. Eventually the BF did develop into a nearly fully-fledged doctrinaire fascist group, but this was after Webster's service on its executive; during the time when she was most active in it, the bulk of its activity consisted of speech-making and pamphleteering that assiduously appropriated the very premillennially tinged conflation of alien communists, secular Jews and apostate Christians that formed the core of Webster's Illuminati. The BF's major campaign, indeed, was fought against the so-called Red Sunday Schools, the secular labour movement's alternative to Christian Sunday Schools that began to spring up after the First World War. These fit well into Webster's interpretive matrix of apostasy as the crux of the present danger.<sup>42</sup> Much more important than the BF's rather theoretical shock troops, the cadres that fought in defence of Christian religious education would have grated many an actual fascist; but for premillennialists like Webster they were the first and crucial means of fighting back. She did not join her fellow BF members when in 1935 the group was wound down and many moved into the British Union of Fascists (BUF). The reasons for this can only be a matter of speculation, but the BUF's lack of interest in Christian defence and propagation may well have been one of them.

The centrality of Christian doctrine to Webster's extremism was further underlined by her religious critique of Nazism. This critique was not entirely unrepresentative of the British far right, certainly not in its formative years when Italian Fascism was often depicted as the safer, because more traditionally Christian, option of the two continental European forms of far-right theory and practice.<sup>43</sup> This was certainly Webster's position, and even as she came to advocate tactical alliances with the Nazis, she directly challenged the Christian-ness of Nazi religion. 'It is idle to denounce the Jews as the enemies of Christianity', she wrote about the early Nazi movement in 1923, 'if one has oneself abandoned the Christian principle'. In a famous exchange of public letters with Kurt Kerlen, a nearly Nazi official, she was even moved to state that the Nazis were allies of the Bolsheviks, traitors to 'white civilisation' and enamoured of tactics destructive of 'all law, all order, all morality, and all religion'. By 1938 Webster had reconsidered this indictment somewhat, so that she supposed thereafter that key Christian principles had, after all, been preserved in Germany and that only an unfortunate minority of Nazis 'oppose Christianity on the grounds that it is the outcome of Judaism'.<sup>44</sup>

Such was the passion of Webster's anti-communism and antisemitism, however, that she had no great difficulties in putting such reservations aside for the duration. She played down Nazi persecution of Jews as long as she possibly could (but admitted eventually that the Nazis had committed 'terrible

<sup>42</sup> Linehan, 61-71, 124-5; Thurlow, 51-7.

<sup>43</sup> G. C. Webster, *The Ideology of the British Right, 1918-1939* (London: Croom Helm 1985), 42-8, 57-62, 63-7.

<sup>44</sup> Webster, *Boche and Bolshevik*, 39, 45; Webster, 'Germany and England', 418.



crimes against humanity'), and she became a rather passionate appeaser (she called appeasement 'the policy of arbitration') and an advocate of an Anglo-Franco-German alliance. Convinced that the Second World War was a Jewish-Communist plot designed to destroy the Christian nations, she was willing, even eager, to join hands with the Nazis.<sup>45</sup> But Webster's solidarity with the Nazis remained limited to these perceptions and tasks, and she put aside her earlier belief in German complicity in the Illuminati for only as long as the Hitler regime was in power and fighting the supposedly Judaized and Illuminized communists. Her reservations about Nazi religiosity continued, and they were always an irritant to many British fascists and Nazis.<sup>46</sup>

Never a Nazi in the national-socialist, *wölkisch* or neo-pagan sense, Webster always remained persuaded that only a revival of the Christian religion could arrest the many conspiracist dangers that she saw in the world. She wanted to engage in 'moral warfare' with a 'living creed',<sup>47</sup> and she recognized that neither Nazi nor traditional fascist organization sufficed for this end. Indeed, in *World Revolution* Webster summarized her whole programme in the dictum: 'The Christian principle—that is the force that must be opposed to the Satanic power of the world revolution.'<sup>48</sup> This is what she meant in 1933 as well, when she advocated what she called 'counterintimidation', a policy proposal that she identified with the Italian Fascists and put forth as her own. As Webster configured counterintimidation, however, it was not primarily about organized violence against socialists and their supposed Jewish allies and masters. Webster stressed that counterintimidation had to be construed in the broadest sense possible so that it would operate 'not in the world of politics alone, but in the worlds of science, of literature and even of "Society"'.<sup>49</sup> 'We are for the greater appreciation of Christian principles in modern life', she stressed at another point, 'for happy marriage, for strengthening the bonds of family life, for a higher standard of morality, . . . for aristocracy' and 'for real beauty as conceived by sane and normal minds trained to true aesthetic standards'.<sup>50</sup>

This was what Nesta Webster ultimately aspired to: a full-scale renovation of all religious, ideological and aesthetic frameworks in all areas of life and thought, a return to those older paradigms and habits of thought that, in her view, were embraced by Christian assumptions. In other words, Nesta Webster aspired to an assisted religious revival. The religion that she wanted revived was partly a figment of her own imagination and largely suffused with secular and occult assumptions, yet it retained a connection with historic Christianity not just in rhetoric but also in the key premillennialist assumption about present-time apocalyptic trials and the emerging anti-Christian world-power that worked in all areas of life. Like others originally rooted in

45 Webster, *World Revolution*, ed. Gittens, 309, 314, 317.

46 Thurlow, 60.

47 Nesta Webster, 'Conservatism a living creed', *Patriot*, 9 February 1922, 5.

48 Webster, *World Revolution*, 110, 325–6.

49 Webster, *The Surrender of an Empire*, 376–7.

50 Webster, 'The red star', 49–51.

premillennialism, Webster was loath to expect anything but a series of victories for the enemy in the period remaining before the cataclysmic end of the world that the returning Christ would usher in. However, she insisted on 'strengthening the things that remaineth' in the meantime. That was the purpose of her political programme.

### **Secular conspiracy or religious premillennialism?**

Depending on the angle of approach, Nesta Webster's public doctrine can be seen either as secular conspiracist or as religious premillennialist. In fact both frameworks of thought were equally crucial, and most frequently they were intertwined and increasingly conflated, both in Webster's own thought and in that of a large section of other twentieth-century Christian fundamentalists. In some ways her own religion was unrepresentative of mainstream fundamentalism, yet her conclusions found an especially receptive audience within that constituency. Deny or denounce as they might some of the antisemitic details of Webster's analysis, those steeped in the categories and susceptibilities of profoundly Manichaean religious fundamentalism had, at the very least, to admit that Nesta Webster was on to a profound eschatological truth when she explained contemporary subversion through the dramatis personae of Christian apocalypticism.

In Webster's lifetime--and at all other times--Christianity was, of course, much else besides, and much that was very different from what it was to her. But all apocalyptically tinged, Manichaean value-systems have inherent in them a tendency to the kind of political extremism and conspiracism that Webster embraced. In the end it is moot to ponder which was more important a catalyst: the immediate existential encounter with unprecedented world change and disturbance or the power of previous and non-empirical apocalyptic susceptibilities. Both were required and both, in part, gave shape to the resultant form of Christian far-right doctrine. The occult experiences that Webster happened to go through were not at all a necessary precondition. Thus it was with Nesta Webster and thus, one has to assume, it is with those who continue, more than a hundred years after her birth, to find her eclectic mixture of Christian fundamentalism, premillennialist apocalypticism and secular antisemitic conspiracism so appealing.

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